

THE ROLE OF WOMEN'S GROUPS IN SUPPORTING VULNERABLE FAMILIES: A TECHNOSCIENTIFIC APPROACH TO THE CHALLENGES OF LEFT-BEHIND FAMILY MEMBERS

Chukwu, N. A.^{1*}; Obiasulu, C.¹; Ojone D.¹

¹Department of Social Work, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

*Author of correspondence, E-mail: nma.njoku@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

This study explores the pivotal role of women's groups in supporting vulnerable families, particularly left-behind family members, in the context of international migration in Abia State, Nigeria. A descriptive cross-sectional design was employed, targeting two major cities, Umuahia and Aba, to capture diverse socio-economic dynamics. Participants were selected using a multistage sampling technique, with 24 individuals comprising left-behind family members and women's group leaders. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns. The study highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by left-behind families, including emotional stress, financial struggles, and social isolation. Women's groups emerged as critical support systems, offering emotional care, cooperative savings, skill acquisition, and health outreach initiatives that enhance resilience among left-behind families. However, challenges such as financial constraints, cultural barriers, and limited institutional support hinder their effectiveness. The findings underscore the importance of strengthening women's groups as community-based safety nets to foster family and community resilience in migration-affected settings.

Keywords: Women's groups, Migration, Left-behind, Social work, Support system.

INTRODUCTION

Migration, particularly labor migration, has become a significant global phenomenon, with millions of individuals relocating annually in search of better employment opportunities, often leaving family members behind in their home communities (Oluwatosin, 2020; Udofia & Essien, 2020). This phenomenon often leads to a range of challenges for left-behind family members, who frequently face social, emotional, and economic difficulties in the absence of the migrating member (Badasso et al., 2020). These difficulties can be particularly pronounced in rural or economically disadvantaged communities, where access to resources is often already limited (Asis, 2016; Jacka, 2014). Left-behind spouses, particularly women, may experience increased responsibilities and stress associated with managing the household and family welfare

without the physical presence of their partner (Tanle, 2023). Furthermore, Surkiene et al. (2024) and Ikpi (2016) noted that, in the absence of the migrating family member, left-behind individuals—especially women—often assume additional responsibilities, including financial and caregiving duties, which can lead to physical and emotional stress. This is especially true when women are tasked with caring for children, elderly parents, or sick relatives without adequate support (Hugo, 2022; Carling, 2018).

Although international migration is typically intended to provide financial support through remittances, left-behind family members may still face economic challenges due to irregular remittance flows, unemployment, and the added financial responsibilities shouldered by household heads. This situation is

particularly challenging for left-behind women, who often have limited economic opportunities and resources, especially in rural areas. In addition, Adepoju (2015) and Wrigley-Asante & Agandia (2015) observed that the separation caused by international migration can lead to emotional challenges such as loneliness, anxiety, and depression among left-behind family members. For spouses, the absence of a partner can strain marital relationships and result in feelings of isolation. Children left behind may also experience emotional distress and anxiety due to the limited parental support, which can negatively impact their mental health and social development.

Given these challenges, left-behind family members require a support system to help them manage responsibilities that were previously shared and to cope with the difficulties associated with being left behind. Women's groups, both religious and social, have proven useful in mitigating the challenges faced by such families. According to Njuki (2020), women's groups are typically embedded within local communities and are familiar with the cultural, social, and religious norms that shape the lives of left-behind family members. This knowledge allows them to provide culturally sensitive support tailored to specific needs, ensuring that assistance aligns with local values and practices. This familiarity helps reduce stigma and increase acceptance of support-seeking behavior, which is essential for families facing societal pressure or isolation (Fapohunda, 2015; Coe, 2011).

Moreover, women's groups have emerged as a critical source of support for left-behind family members. These groups, often rooted in community traditions, mutual aid principles, or religious affiliations, offer a vital social safety net.

Studies suggest that women's groups can provide various forms of support, including financial aid, childcare assistance, and emotional support, all of which are crucial for families coping with the prolonged absence of one or more members (Desai & Potter, 2014; Kabeer, 2011). Alzubaidi (2021) highlighted how women's groups, whether formally structured or informally organized, play a vital role in helping families navigate the demands of daily life. Nair & Tankha (2015) also observed that women's self-help groups in India, through collective savings and lending practices, helped left-behind families achieve economic resilience. Women's groups also offer a platform for social support, allowing members to share challenges, seek advice, and foster a sense of belonging, which is particularly comforting for families dealing with separation and isolation (Njuki et al., 2020; Tshma & Monde, 2015).

Despite the valuable contributions of women's support groups, there remains bias against them (Chanda & Ngulube, 2024). This bias manifests in limited strategic connections and a lack of financial support from potential backers (Ogbonna, 2024). Consequently, these women's support groups often struggle to assist left-behind family members as effectively as they could. Additionally, cultural biases in many African societies further restrict their impact. For instance, in Northern Nigeria, where Islamic tradition predominates, religious and traditional leaders wield considerable authority, and women's opinions are often overlooked (Ibrahim, 2018; Olulube, 2015). As a result, when women's support groups advocate for the needs of left-behind family members, their efforts may be dismissed, leading to unresolved issues and a lack of justice. Furthermore, personal biases within women's support groups can create

challenges. For example, Emeka-Nwobia (2021) noted that within the Umuada, a women's support group in traditional Igbo society, the views of unmarried women may be disregarded, which undermines the group's efforts, as the perspectives of unmarried women could be valuable in supporting left-behind families.

Women's support groups also face a lack of institutional support, which hinders their ability to assist left-behind families effectively. Without backing from larger organizations and institutions, their efforts often lack credibility, making them less likely to be recognized or trusted by those in need (Fapohunda, 2015). This lack of credibility is a significant disadvantage, as left-behind family members may be reluctant to seek help from these groups, leaving them without essential support (Njuki et al., 2020). Additionally, societal restrictions placed on women in various cultures further limit the effectiveness of these support groups in providing aid to left-behind families. Gailits et al. (2019) identified such restrictions in India as major obstacles that prevent these groups from functioning optimally.

Addressing the challenges faced by women's support groups is crucial to enhancing their effectiveness and ensuring that all families receive the necessary support. While there is growing recognition of the role of women's groups as support systems, there is still limited understanding of their specific roles in assisting left-behind families. Much of the existing literature focuses on the economic benefits of these groups (Mayoux, 2001), but fewer studies have explored their social and emotional impact on family resilience and mental health. Given this gap, the present study aims to examine how women's groups mitigate the social and psychological challenges faced by left-

behind family members. Specifically, it will explore the mechanisms through which women's groups provide emotional care, economic assistance, and community solidarity, fostering a supportive environment for left-behind families. This study seeks to contribute to the literature on migration and family resilience by highlighting the often-overlooked role of women's groups as a source of collective support. Through social support theory, the study will offer insights into the practices and impacts of women's groups, shedding light on their potential as agents of social stability and family welfare in communities affected by migration.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To assess the experiences of left-behind family members receiving support from women's support groups.
2. To examine the various ways in which women's support groups have impacted the overall development of left-behind family members.
3. To identify the challenges encountered by women's support groups in supporting left-behind family members.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in the theory of communalism, which serves as the theoretical framework. The theory views African societies as traditionally communal rather than individualistic. In communal societies, collective welfare takes precedence over personal success, helping members manage stress, improve well-being, and foster resilience (Mbiti, 1969). The theory is highly relevant for examining how women's groups aid left-behind families in coping with the absence of a migrant family member. One of the core

elements of communalism, as articulated by Gyekye (1997), is collective responsibility, which sees individuals as part of a larger whole, where their actions affect the entire community. Communalism also fosters mutual care, empathy, social stability, and encouragement. These qualities help reduce stress and feelings of isolation among left-behind families. Women's groups offer this emotional support through shared experiences, child-rearing, conflict resolution, and providing a sense of belonging.

In the context of left-behind family members, this support is essential in mitigating loneliness, anxiety, and depression, which are often experienced by spouses and children due to family separation (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Another core element of communalism is instrumental support, which refers to tangible assistance such as financial help or help with daily tasks. Many women's groups in Nigeria provide instrumental support through cooperative savings schemes, microfinance, and collective labor arrangements. This type of support is crucial in helping left-behind family members manage household expenses, cover emergency costs, and maintain

family stability in the absence of the primary breadwinner (Thoits, 2011).

Informational support is also a key element of communalism theory, which emphasizes the sharing of advice, guidance, and information to help individuals make decisions and manage challenges. Women's groups serve as valuable sources of knowledge on healthcare, financial management, and child-rearing practices. Informational support is especially important for left-behind family members, as it empowers them with the knowledge necessary to handle household responsibilities and make informed choices (Okpara, 2020).

Therefore, the theory of communalism provides a framework for analyzing how women's groups meet the multi-dimensional needs of left-behind family members. By offering a combination of emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support, women's groups help individuals cope with the economic, social, and psychological challenges of family separation due to migration. Understanding these mechanisms enables researchers to assess the broader impact of women's groups on the well-being of left-behind families and their role in strengthening community resilience.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Abia State, located in the southeastern region of Nigeria. Abia State consists of 17 Local Government Areas (LGAs), with its capital in Umuahia and its commercial hub in Aba. The state is characterized by diverse socio-economic activities, including agriculture, trade, and manufacturing. Its population is predominantly Igbo, with vibrant cultural practices and a growing trend of urbanization. The study employed a descriptive cross-sectional design to

examine the role of women's groups as support systems for left-behind family members. This design allowed for data collection at a single point in time to explore relationships between the variables of interest.

The target population consisted of individuals aged 18 years and above who are left-behind family members, as well as women leaders. A sample size of 24 participants was selected, comprising five male and five female left-behind family

members from Aba, five male and five female left-behind family members from Umuahia, and four women leaders (two from each of the selected communities). A multistage sampling technique was employed to select the study participants.

- **Stage 1:** Umuahia and Aba were purposively selected because they are the largest cities in the state. While Umuahia is the state capital, where most left-behind families are likely to be found, Aba hosts the largest international market, where some left-behind families may own businesses or have investments.
- **Stage 2:** Simple random sampling by balloting was used to select one local government area from each of the two selected cities. The local governments selected were Umuahia North and Aba South. Simple random sampling by balloting was also used to select one community from each of the selected local government areas. The selected communities were Ikwuano from Umuahia North and Okafor from Aba South.
- **Stage 3:** Eligibility and availability sampling techniques were used to select participants aged 18 years and above with international migrant family members, as well as leaders of women's groups existing in the two selected communities.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore qualitative insights on the role of women's groups in supporting vulnerable families, specifically left-behind family members. Thematic analysis was used to analyze interview data. Transcripts were coded to identify recurring themes and patterns.

Informed consent: Participants were informed about the study's objectives,

procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Written consent was obtained before data collection. The data collected in this study is anonymized, and personal identifiers are not disclosed.

Results

This section presents the findings from in-depth interviews conducted with left-behind family members to explore their experiences, the roles played by women's groups as support systems, the challenges they face while playing this role, and how social workers can help. The results are presented under themes that emerged from the study objectives, including the experiences of Left-behind family members.

Emotional impact

The data from the study shows that participants' experiences were both positive and negative. Most participants shared positive experiences related to increased finances due to remittances from migrant family members. However, participants also noted that their experiences as left-behind family members went beyond financial benefits. Many shared other challenges, such as social stigma, loneliness, financial struggles, increased responsibilities, and emotional impacts. For instance, Oluomachi, a 40-year-old female participant with four children whose husband migrated for business opportunities, said:

"I feel like a part of me is missing since my husband left. The house feels empty, and I worry about him constantly. But I also worry about us here..."

Relating to emotional impact, Ifeoma, a 26-year-old mother of two, shared:

"It's been tough. The children miss their father a lot, especially during important moments like birthdays and school events."

Financial struggles

While respondents confirmed improvements in their financial situations, better accommodation, and business opportunities due to remittances sent by international migrants, some participants identified financial struggles as a major challenge associated with being left behind. For instance, Emeka, a 20-year-old left-behind student, said:

“Although life is better with the remittances, we still have to take up minimal jobs to make ends meet.”

Mrs. Ogbonna shared a similar experience:

“He sends money, but it’s not consistent. Sometimes we have to borrow to pay our bills and repay when he eventually sends some money.”

Increased responsibilities

Study respondents also noted that since the international migration of their family members, their responsibilities toward the family had increased. They have taken on the responsibilities of the migrants in addition to their own. For example, Chinwe, a 45-year-old mother of five, said: “My husband left for Australia five years ago, and since he left, I’ve been the one taking care of everything – the children, the business, the house, and even his sick mother. It’s overwhelming sometimes.”

Ifeoma, a 26-year-old woman, shared her experience:

“We sold most of our properties, even borrowed a huge amount of money to send my elder brother abroad. Since then, we have not heard from him. Right now, I had to drop out of school to work and help my parents pay back the money we borrowed.”

Social stigma and loneliness

Study respondents also expressed that the international migration of their family members was associated with feelings of loneliness and social

stigmatization. For instance, Rita, a 40-year-old mother of two, narrated:

“People in the community gossip about me, saying my husband abandoned me. They don’t understand he left to support us.”

A similar sentiment came from a 68-year-old woman whose four children live abroad. She said:

“I feel so lonely without any of my children around, especially at my age. Even though they call often, it’s not the same as having at least one of them here with us.”

Impact of Women’s support groups on the overall development of Left-behind family members

The study participants provided valuable insights into the various roles and impacts of women’s support groups in their lives as left-behind family members. For instance, a 42-year-old mother of three described the financial support rendered to her by the women’s support group, stating: “Being part of this group has been so helpful to me. With so many expectations, we sold off some properties to send my son abroad. However, things did not turn out the way we thought. Thanks to the women’s support group, they gave me a small loan to start my petty trading business. With the income, I can now contribute to the family upkeep.”

A 33-year-old woman also highlighted:

“Through the cooperative savings in the women’s group, I was able to pay for my son’s school fees when we had no money from my husband.”

Several participants emphasized the importance of emotional support and counseling within the group. For instance, Mr. Paul, a 49-year-old man, shared:

“When I felt overwhelmed and lonely, the women in the group encouraged me and shared their experiences. It gave me hope that I’m not alone in this struggle.”

Study participants also affirmed skill acquisition and economic empowerment as part of the support provided by the women's support group. For instance, Amaka, a 40-year-old women's leader, narrated:

"During the August meeting, members of the women's association teach each other skills such as soap making and other small crafts. Some members have started selling their products and earning their own money."

Mama Emeka, a 55-year-old left-behind woman, affirmed:

"The group provided training on farming techniques. Since then, I have been farming yam without owning farmland. We don't rely entirely on remittances from my husband anymore."

Health and welfare initiatives among left-behind family members were other areas improved by the women's support groups. Participants shared that women's support groups have continuously provided funding and organized health outreach programs that offer free medication and checkups for vulnerable people, especially left-behind family members. For instance, a 43-year-old left-behind woman said:

"When my child had convulsions, the women's group immediately came to my aid, helped me with funds, and even accompanied me to the hospital. Without them, I don't know what I would have done."

Challenges encountered by the Women's support groups in providing support for Left-behind family members

Financial constraints

Study participants highlighted the significant challenges faced by women's support groups in their efforts to assist left-behind family members. A common concern was the lack of adequate resources

to meet the needs of these families. One of the women group leaders said:

"We want to help more families, but we lack the funding to sustain even the little we do. Sometimes we have to use our personal resources, which are not enough."

Cultural and social barriers

Cultural and social barriers were also identified as major challenges women encounter when providing assistance to left-behind families. For instance, one woman leader said:

"In certain cases, the families do not want external help because they fear stigma or shame from the community." (WL/Aba)

Members of the women's support groups also identified a lack of collaboration and support from both government agencies and other organizations in providing assistance to vulnerable people, especially left-behind family members. Sustainability was another major challenge raised by the group. A woman leader from Umuahia responded:

"The support we provide is often short-term, but these families need long-term solutions. It frustrates us that we can't do more."

Discussion of findings

Left-behind family members, particularly women and children, face a range of challenges due to the migration of a spouse, primary caregivers, or major income earners in the family. Findings from this study revealed that left-behind family members encounter multifaceted challenges encompassing emotional, economic, health, and social difficulties, among others. Similar findings have been reported by Jacka (2014), Badosso et al. (2020), and Hugo (2020).

Women's groups play a vital role in providing support to these families, especially the left-behind. These groups

often act as community-based safety nets, offering emotional and financial support to help members manage household responsibilities in the absence of key family members. One major finding of this research is that women's groups create a sense of belonging and emotional support for left-behind family members. This finding corroborates the work of Chant (2018), Desai & Potter (2014), Njika et al. (2020), and Alzubaidi (2021), who highlight the role of women's networks in reducing isolation and stress among women who take on additional family responsibilities due to migration, by providing a platform for shared experiences that help lessen the psychological burden of separation and foster resilience.

The study also found that women's groups play a crucial role in improving financial stability for left-behind families. They do this by providing loans and teaching skills that generate income. This finding aligns with the views of Kabeer (2015), who suggests that women's groups encourage participation in micro-financial initiatives or cooperative societies to gain access to financial resources, which can mitigate the economic strain caused by the absence of a family member. Through collective savings and credit schemes, women's groups enable members to start small businesses, manage household expenses, invest in education or healthcare, and lend money to individuals in need.

While women's groups have been impactful, findings from the study also revealed that they face challenges such as limited resources, cultural restrictions, lack of institutional backing, and emotional and psychological strains. Similar findings were made by Agarwal (2016), Gailits et al. (2019), and Emeka-Nwabia (2021), who found that the effectiveness of women's groups in assisting individuals and

communities depends on external support, such as funding and training, which may not always be readily available. Additionally, traditional gender norms can restrict women's participation as support systems, limiting their potential and impact.

Conclusion

In conclusion, women play an indispensable role as support systems for left-behind family members, particularly in the contexts of migration, family separation, or socio-economic challenges. They often assume multifaceted responsibilities, serving as caregivers, emotional anchors, teachers, financial managers, and decision-makers. Through their resilience and adaptability, women provide stability and continuity, ensuring the well-being of their families despite the absence of key members. In many cases, they also navigate the emotional challenges of separation while offering psychological support to other family members, fostering a sense of cohesion and hope despite difficult circumstances.

However, this pivotal role is often accompanied by challenges such as emotional stress, social isolation, and financial strain. The lack of resources, adequate societal recognition, and institutional support can exacerbate these difficulties, leaving women overburdened. It is essential, therefore, for communities and policymakers to provide targeted support to these women, including access to education, financial resources, mental health services, and community networks. Such interventions and support will not only empower women to effectively manage their responsibilities but also strengthen the resilience and stability of left-behind families. Ultimately, women's roles as support systems are a testament to their strength and adaptability, serving as the backbone of families during times of

separation or adversity. By recognizing and addressing the unique challenges they face, societies can ensure that these women are empowered to sustain their families and thrive as individuals contributing to broader societal development.

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